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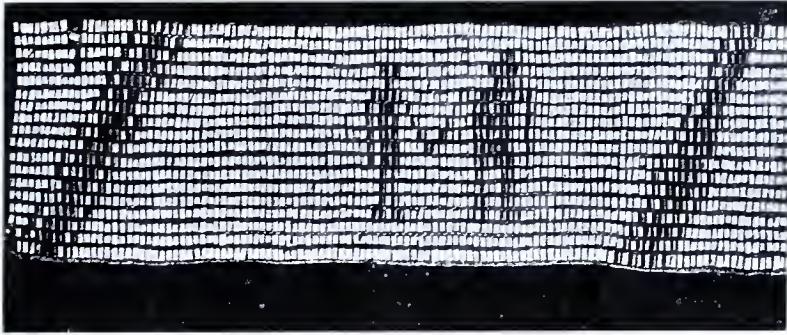
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The Life of a Lenape Boy



The Penn Treaty Belt in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

THE LIFE OF A LENAPE BOY.

BY JISKOGO

(*M. R. Harrington*)

IN the great State of Pennsylvania today there are probably few persons alive in whose veins runs the blood of the Lenni Lenápe or Delaware Indians—yet anything pertaining to these people should be of interest to every Pennsylvanian, for the name of this tribe is writ large in the early annals of the State.

It is not my aim to trace written history here, however, for that may be dug out from printed sources, but rather to sketch the life of an individual Lenápe boy as it must have been before the first great white-winged canoe bearing its cargo of pale-skinned strangers, was seen upon the "Great Water Where Daylight Appears"—otherwise known as the Atlantic Ocean. My information has been mostly obtained from surviving Lenápe whom I have visited in their exile in Canada and Oklahoma; while a little has been uncovered by the archeologist's trowel in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Our hero was born in Ekoongweta village—in English "Under the Hill"—and his mother belonged to the Turtle Band of the Unami tribe of the Lenápe. That made the little fellow a Turtle too, notwithstanding the fact that his father was a Turkey band member in good standing. The baby was not born in the family residence, but in a little bark-covered cabin built for such purposes some distance to the rear—a tiny hut hardly big enough for his mother and the woman who attended her.

Some time before his birth his mother's relatives had been taking careful note of their dreams, in the hope of finding a proper name for the new arrival, and were becoming perturbed because none had been revealed to them, when one morning the mother's aunt appeared at the door in great excitement. "It has been given to me!" she cried "Last night as I dreamed a voice spoke to me. 'Riding-the-deer is coming, Riding-the-deer is coming' it said over and over again, just like that! 'Riding-the-'"

"That's a good name for a boy" interrupted the expectant mother "but what if it's a girl?"

"We'll just make it 'Woman-riding-the-deer'" beamed the aunt "that sounds well too, don't you think?"

The child turned out to be a boy, however, and Riding-the-deer became his lifelong name, and this was announced at the great Annual Ceremony held in the Big-House or Temple that Fall; but it must be confessed that later on his boy friends conferred upon him the nick-name of "Snapping Turtle" because of his quick temper.

However that may be the little fellow was wrapped as soon as possible after his arrival in an old deerskin robe of his father's, by way of disguise, so that prowling ghosts would not know he was so young, and tiny holes were cut in his little moccasins, so that he might say to them when they beckoned "See, I have holes in my moccasins—I cannot travel. How can I go with you?"

Very soon after birth he was tied on his cradle-board, softly padded with shredded bark, and the board remained his sleeping and resting place the first year of his life—in fact until he out-grew it. And let me tell you he cried for it, too, whenever he felt sleepy or miserable.

The little barkhouse on the edge of the village seemed enormous to him as a toddler, and he loved to explore the contents of the numerous bags and baskets beneath the sleeping benches, and to throw things into the fire that burned beneath the smokehole in the center,—when Mother was not looking. But no matter how naughty he might be, he was never spanked or struck in anyway, and very rarely scolded.

During warm weather his mother had no worries about his clothes for the little tyke didn't wear any, unless a string about his neck with a few beads on it could be called a garment; but the first Fall after he learned to walk she made him a full miniature outfit just like his dad's—moccasins, long leggings, breechclout and robe—and perhaps he wasn't proud, especially after Dad made him a little bow and arrow! I think Dad was a little bit proud himself!

In those days there were no schools in Pennsylvania, but Riding-the-deer received a good education for all that. His father, and especially his favorite uncle—his mother's youngest brother—never missed an opportunity to teach him something. In this way the child learned the names and habits of animals and birds, the different trees and herbs and their uses, tracking, trail signs, picture writing, the principles and practice of hunting and war. When you add to these the traditions, rituals and songs of the native religion, the magic formulas to be used on various occasions, the rules of tribal etiquette; the stirring tales of warlike deeds and long migrations which formed the unwritten history of the people, it made quite a curriculum.

However it must not be thought that the boy spent all his time in learning—not he! Like any healthy boy of today he romped and played



A Lenape Indian in Oklahoma, 1909.

with his fellows and the old swimming hole was a favorite haunt in warm weather. But that was not all. Riding-the-deer never heard of baseball, yet he was a skilful lacrosse player, and greatly enjoyed football, which in those days was not a pitched battle as now, but real fun, for a girl team often played against the boys, and sometimes beat them, too. Riding-the-deer also played the game in which spears are thrown at a rolling hoop; but the other boys tried to keep him out of the bow-shooting contests—his arrow flew too straight! For rainy days indoors there was the game of bowl-and-dice, the “scatter game” something like jackstraws, and last but not least, the favorite “Moccasin Game” in which a player hid a large shell bead or some other small object agreed upon, under one of a row of moccasins while his opponent tried to guess where it was.

In manual training his course (under the same teachers) included lessons in stone working, when he learned to chip flint quite rapidly into the form of small arrowheads, and, with somewhat more difficulty, into larger implements, such as knives. The slow battering of tough stones into axe heads, was more tedious, but it had to be mastered; pipe-making required more experience and a more delicate touch and was reserved for a post-graduate course! He watched with interest his sisters as they learned to shape the crude egg-shaped earthen cooking pots, building up the coils of clay under his mother's instruction, and as they struggled with the intricacies of weaving twined sacks of slippery elm bark fiber and Indian hemp, and the easier tasks of making splint baskets and rush mats. These things, and especially the delicate art of embroidering with colored deer hair he admired, but they were not for him. The only things he was permitted to make in the line of domestic utensils were the wooden bowls, spoons, ladles and stirring paddles, and he soon learned to carve these very artistically with hard, sharp implements made of beaver-teeth. Bowls were not hollowed with these however, but by means of hot coals applied again and again, the charcoal being scraped away between each application; and the same held good for the making of the dug-out log canoes, so popular with the Lenápe. Riding-the-deer never saw a birch bark canoe, and even the crude canoes of elm bark such as were sometimes made by his people were thought to be rather too delicate for practical, prolonged use.

His most important lesson was, that a man must be, first of all a provider; that is, he must furnish all the meat and all the fish consumed by his family, which formed the greater part of their diet, and he must bring in the skins that clothed them. Secondly every man must be a soldier, ready at all times to protect his family, not only against wild beasts, from whom there was relatively little danger, but against numerous and pitiless human enemies. Also he was taught that to the woman belonged the home and the garden, and it was her duty and privilege to care for both, and for her children.

Riding-the-deer must have been about eleven years old when he had his first religious experience—and at first he didn't know what to make of it.

He could not understand why, when his parents had always been so good to him, that they should suddenly turn against him and mistreat him, speaking harshly to him, feeding him on scraps of food the dog would hardly look at. But when one day they painted his face black and drove him out of the house it began to dawn upon him that there might be some object behind it all.



An Indian Woman Grinding Corn in a Wooden Mortar.

Questioning older boys, he found out that such was indeed the case; that he was supposed to go out into the woods and fast; and that the apparent cruel treatment was merely to induce some supernatural being to take pity on the suffering child and, in a dream or vision, offer to become his guardian spirit, at the same time giving him some blessing or power that would be his reliance through life.

Fighting loneliness and the dread of wild beasts, enemies and unseen evil spirits the little boy forced his faltering steps to a small cave far away in the

forest he had seen one day when hunting with his father, and three days, praying to Gishelamukaong the Great Spirit, the Great Powers of the World, his Helpers—among them the Earth, the Sun, the Four Winds and the Thunder. On the morning of the fourth day, before dawn, he saw in a dream the Living Solid Face or Mask-Being, the Guardian of Game, a strange creature covered with shaggy hair, except for the great moon-like face painted half black and half red. Then the vision spoke:

“I, Misinghalikun, when I go, from place to place, I ride a deer. I have taken pity, because they named you, ‘Riding-the-deer’. Now a precious blessing, I am going to give you.” In the dream Solid Face handed the boy a ball of deer hair, and this symbolized the “power” that had been given him.

Indeed, it was the truth, for Riding-the-deer became a great hunter, and why not? Power had been given him by the Guardian of Game himself. And when, in later years, Riding-the-deer took part in the Annual Ceremony, he recited his vision, and sang, as his own personal song of power, the words his guardian had said to him.

Even at fifteen he was a noted hunter, and the daughters of prominent families began to look upon him with eyes of favor. Now, there was one in particular, Floating-Feather-Woman by name, who—

But, alas, I cannot tell what happened. That, indeed, is another story.

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